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Guides to English Classics Series

HAMLET

(Shakespeare)

BY

CORNELIA BEARE, B.A.

INSTRUCTOR OF ENGLISH, WADLEIGH HIGH SCHOOL
NEW YORK CITY



NEW YORK
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PREFACE

WITH the market so crowded with editions of the classics, the publishers of these Outlines would have hesitated to bring forth this book, were there not a universal demand among teachers and students for just such exposition as is here presented. Editors of works studied in high schools are apt to forget that their explanations are meant to help the inexperienced reader. For this reason the usual school editions have been of slight help to the student.

The high school teachers who have prepared these Outlines have had years of experience with the mind that is confronted with a great literary work for the first time. They have given just such information and suggestive guidance as will enable the student fully to understand and enjoy the masterpiece, without being lost in a mass of irrelevant and dry discussion. They have arranged their material so as to make it possible for the student, if necessary, to pursue his work independently, whether his aim be the preparation for an examination or the furthering of his general culture.

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INTRODUCTION

In order to read *Hamlet* intelligently it is necessary to know something about the production of a play at Shakespere's time, the difference between this play and the old "drama of blood" which preceded it, the use of the supernatural at that time, the source of the plot and the language of the play.

"The drama of blood" is a name given to the earliest tragedies because of the fact that "They present the bloody unfolding of a series of murders and allied crimes, so that every page fairly reeks with blood." Of Shakespere's plays *Macbeth* comes nearest to filling this definition.

Production of a Play at the Time of Shakespere.—
Let us imagine ourselves citizens of London in the seventeenth century, on our way to a performance of *Hamlet* at the *Curtain*, Shakespere's own theater, across the river and just outside the city limits, to which bounds the city fathers had banished all such places. It is nearly three o'clock, and for hours the flag of Lord Burleigh has been flying above the theater, for his players or "servants" are to give the tragedy this afternoon. We arrive at a curious-looking building, almost circular, with no windows visible, and with but part of a roof, the center being open to the sky. Paying our shilling

each, we are permitted to find seats upon the rush-strewn stage, where already a number of gallants are assembled. No ladies are present, unless they be concealed behind the curtains of the rude boxes along the walls, for one can not so call the loud-voiced women of the streets who throng with the rough men on the open space before the stage, called the pit. The stage is hung in black, and at the center, extending well out to the front, is a queer sort of box-like arrangement, affording a sort of inner chamber where all interior scenes take place. From behind the arras at the back of the stage come two pages who walk to the front and announce the scene. Of scenery as we know it the stage is bare. The actors are dressed as are the folk around us, except that particular characters wear some distinguishing article such as a crown or a sword. Indeed we recognize the dress so badly worn by the shrill-voiced boy who plays the part of Ophelia, as having been worn but lately by a lady of the Burleigh household. As the play progresses the actors not actually playing at the moment often pass remarks to the members of the audience seated on the stage, to the great disgust of those in the pit, who do not hesitate to make their displeasure known. No break occurs between the scenes for there is no scenery to be shifted and the play moves swiftly, the action broken only when the audience in the pit register their objection to the loud talking on the stage, or perhaps by a scuffle when a pickpocket is arrested at his trade and tied to a stake till the play is over, so that he may not molest others and yet may see the play for which he paid his sixpence for admission to the pit. Six o'clock sees the

theater empty and all honest citizens hastening home before dark.

Origin of the Plot.—The story itself is taken in part from a translation of the *Historia Danica* of Saxo Grammaticus. Here the story of Hamlet appears. Shakespere has not adhered closely to this account, either in the names or in the natures of the chief characters, especially of Hamlet. He takes from it the account of the murder, the feigned madness, the hasty marriage, the hatred of the uncle-stepfather, the journey to England, but the part of Ophelia and the love story are not there, nor is Hamlet in any way the brooding philosopher of the play.

Another play on the subject is known to have existed as early as 1587, and this Shakespere, as a playwright, must have seen, but the real Hamlet, with his insight into life, his profound melancholy, his intense humanity, is the work of Shakespere alone.

Use of the Supernatural.—Because of the utter absence of any attempt at creating a stage illusion, and because the audience of Shakespere's time were trained to use their imaginations, the poet constantly makes use of the supernatural. In *Macbeth* we have the air-drawn dagger, and Banquo's ghost. In *Hamlet* one of the most important characters is the ghost of the murdered king. The manager today has to decide how to create for a sophisticated audience the real atmosphere of ghostliness, but the manager of that day had no difficulty with an audience that believed firmly in ghosts and witches and could see nothing strange in a costumer's bill that demanded six shillings for a pair of gloves for God!

The Language of Shakespere.—The actual reading

need present but few difficulties if we remember these few facts, pointed out by Dr. Abbott in his *Shakesperean Grammar*:

"Shakespere lived at a time when the grammar and vocabulary of the English language were in a state of transition. Various points were not fixed, so the grammar of Shakespere is not only different from ours but at times it differs from itself. Almost any part of speech is used as any other part of speech. They *askance* their eyes, they speak of the *backward* and *abyssm* of time; they *happy* their friends or *fall* the ax on the neck of their enemy. Even the cases of the pronouns are interchangeable, and the lover extols his lady as 'the chaste, the fair, the unexpressive *she*,' while *his* may mean his or its. Participles and past tenses are used by chance, not by rule, verbs agree or disagree with their subjects, double negatives are as frequent as double prepositions." But with all this irregularity, the meaning stands out so clear that the wording, save in rare cases, does not hinder the understanding.

THE STORY OF HAMLET

Act I. Expository and Incentive

Scene 1. strikes the keynote of the play in the dreary cold of the winter night and in the words of Francisco: "I am sick at heart," and in the mention of the ghost. The watchmen have told Horatio, Hamlet's friend, of the dread apparition that has twice appeared in their watch, and he, not quite believing, has come to see. The ghost appears in the form of the dead King, but leaves without making reply to their questions as to who and what he is, and why he is there. They discuss the war with young Fortinbras of Norway, which threatens the kingdom, and see in the apparition of the dead king a portent of evil like that which troubled the "most high and palmy state of Rome a little ere the mightiest Julius fell." The ghost returns and seems ready to speak to them when the cock crows. They depart as morning dawns, resolved to tell what they have seen to "young Hamlet," sure that the ghost will speak to him.

Scene 2. The king explains that since the death of his brother, the late king Hamlet, and his own marriage to Gertrude, the widow of Hamlet, he has taken on himself to carry out the war with young Fortinbras, and has sent ambassadors to the Norwegian King to demand sur-

render. Laertes, son of Polonius, a noble of the court, who has come from France to the coronation of Claudius, asks and gets permission to return to France. Young Prince Hamlet, the only somber figure in the gay court, asked by his mother to lay aside his grief, bursts into a fit of passionate remonstrance at the charge that he is feigning grief. The king adds his request to the queen's and begs him not to return to the University of Wittenberg, but to remain in Denmark as his heir. Hamlet promises. As the others go out he bursts into a passionate soliloquy over his mother's hurried marriage to her late husband's brother, and her seeming forgetfulness of the dead king. He feels that only evil can come of it, but sees nothing for him to do but grieve. "Break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue." Horatio and the watchmen thereupon enter to tell of the ghost, and he at once resolves to go with them to the ramparts to see for himself what this may be. "My father's spirit in arms!" he cries, "All is not well! I fear foul play." (Again the keynote of impending evil.)

Scene 3 introduces us to the last of the important characters, Ophelia, and makes us aware of Hamlet's love for her, at the same time revealing her gentle, weak nature that permits her to be swayed by any stronger will. Her brother, Laertes, warns her that a prince is not free to love as he will but only to wed as the "main voice of Denmark" approves, at the same time hinting that princes are prone to love and run away. His father, Polonius, speeds him on his way with the famous advice as to conduct that might almost be called the gentleman's manual, so often has it been quoted as such, since. In

it one sees all the shrewd worldly wisdom of the old courtier. As the son departs the father turns to Ophelia, and emphasizes the advice Laertes has just given her, bidding her give up at once all thought of Hamlet's love. Ophelia is unwilling to believe any evil of the man she loves, but, like a dutiful daughter, promises to obey.

Scenes 4 and 5 take place on the ramparts. Hamlet regrets the wild feasting that is giving the Danish people a bad name among other nations. As he speaks, the ghost enters. It beckons him aside and he goes, despite the remonstrances of the others. Questioning the ghost he learns that his fears of evil have been founded on fact, that Claudius poisoned the late king to get his crown and his wife. Thus speaking, the ghost exacts from Hamlet a solemn promise to revenge his "most foul murder." At the same time he forbids his son to harm in any way the woman who was partner to the crime. Hamlet swears to remember the command of the ghost and see that it is executed. With this promise he enters upon the real action of the play. The introduction ends, and the incentive has been reached. He swears the others to secrecy, and cautions them to show no sign of any knowledge of what they witnessed, and as he asks their promise the voice of the ghost is heard from the depths below, crying "Swear!" And so they part, Hamlet uttering the prophetic words:

"The times are out of joint; O cursed spite
That ever I was born to set it right."

He knows his own weakness and the greatness of the task to which he has been set.

Act II. The Rising Action Develops and the Complicating Forces are Introduced

Scene 1. Polonius sends his servant to investigate his son's actions in Paris. As the messenger goes Ophelia enters, terrified, telling her father of the strange actions of Hamlet who has just come to her, his face wild, his dress disordered—mad, she fears, because she has refused his love. Polonius sees in this an explanation of the prince's strange behavior that has puzzled the court in the three months that have elapsed since Act I., and goes to tell the king of it.

Scene 2. The king has sent for two former college mates of Hamlet's, Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern, to get them to study Hamlet and find, if they can, the nature of his madness. King Claudius hears Polonius' tale of Hamlet's love for Ophelia, and bids them see if this be the cause. Polonius interviews Hamlet, who replies in words that sound mad yet bite shrewdly, so shrewdly that the old man comments, "If this be madness there is method in it," never suspecting that the melancholy Dane is taking bitter pleasure in ridiculing him to his face. As Polonius goes, the two friends come in. Hamlet shrewdly suspects that they have come at the king's request. He tells them that he has of late been deeply troubled, so that life has lost all its beauty, and he finds no joy in man nor in woman. The two tell him of the coming of a band of players. At once a scheme to test the king and prove his guilt beyond doubt flashes into his mind. He receives the players as his old friends, and bids Polonius care for them as honored guests. He de-

tains the leader of the troupe and arranges to have "The Murder of Gonzago" played before the king, adding certain lines of his own. In this way he will be able to see if the guilt of Claudius will betray itself. His fatal tendency to inquire into a matter, to see and know as well as feel, has made him delay these three months the keeping of his promise to the ghost, and he has even come to doubt the ghost, to fear it may be an instrument sent from the devil to lead him into evil. And so he resolves:

"The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king."

Act III. The Climax is Reached

He had made a definite promise to the ghost which, so far, he has not fulfilled, a delay for which he hates himself, yet which he seems unable to bring to a close. Consequently, the king is beginning to wonder what may be the cause of his strange actions, and to question whether it will not be well to let him go abroad on some errand which shall keep him where he can do no harm. In *scene i* Claudius questions the two friends whom he has set to spy upon Hamlet, but with no result. They tell him of Hamlet's plan to have the players perform at court, and of his request that the king and the queen be present. The king assents and then dismisses all, explaining to the queen that he and Polonius are planning to spy on Hamlet as he talks with Ophelia and see if this love for her be the cause of his madness. Even Polonius is a little ashamed of using so fine a thing as Hamlet's love as a means to decoy him into betrayal, while Claudius shows

us that the deed by which he won a wife and a throne sits heavy upon his soul. As they hide, Hamlet enters, pondering whether it may not, after all, be best to end a life that has so little but suffering for him, and to give over his attempt to face, single-handed, the difficulties he must meet if he is to keep his promise. If he could be sure that death were but a sleep, he would no longer bear the burden, but the uncertainty gives him pause. Meeting Ophelia, he becomes ironical, for this Ophelia, who has failed him when he needed her love and help, is not the woman he had loved. Then, in bitter rebuke, he bids her get to a nunnery, where, at least, she may work no more harm to foolish men. As he goes out, Ophelia bitterly grieves over the change in him and her share in causing it. Claudius fears him more than ever, for he sees clearly that this is not madness, and so resolves to send him out of Denmark.

Scene 2 shows the players before the court, presenting the play, amended by Hamlet, which shall represent the murder of King Hamlet by Claudius and so trap Claudius. Horatio has been taken into Hamlet's confidence. They watch the king as the murder is enacted, and are convinced of his guilt as he rises and hurries from the hall, unable to bear the sight. Polonius, more sure than ever of Hamlet's madness, comes to bid him go to his mother's room. He goes, prepared to wring her soul by his reproaches.

Scene 3 brings the actual climax. The king, in an agony of suffering, endeavors to kneel in prayer for forgiveness, but he cannot bend his stubborn soul to penitence. As he is struggling, Hamlet enters and sees his

chance to keep his vow. But again his fatal habit of looking at all sides instead of acting comes to the fore. If he kill the king now in the act of prayer, Claudius' soul, evil as it is, will go straight to heaven, while that of the man he slew suffers in purgatory. So he lets the chance go and his word remains unfulfilled. Even as he leaves, the king, rising from his knees, tells us how vain had been his effort to pray, and we realize that Hamlet has had his chance and lost it.

Scene 4. Polonius hides behind the arras to watch Hamlet with his mother. The queen, alarmed at Hamlet's wild words and angry reproaches, cries for help. Polonius betrays his presence and Hamlet stabs him, believing it to be the king, and thus unknowingly makes for himself another foe, Laertes, who is to avenge his father's death. He turns to his mother and holds up to her soul the mirror of her sins in such awful righteous wrath that she is torn with shame and only the intervention of the ghost of his father saves her from even severer treatment. She does not see the apparition, and believes that Hamlet raves in madness. The ghost rebukes Hamlet for his "almost blunted purpose" and bids him help his tortured mother. He wrings from her the promise not to let the king coax from her an account of what happened in the interview, and tells her of his impending visit to England in the company of his two friends, whom he trusts as much as he would a poisonous serpent, and hints at his plan to let them be "hoist with their own petard"—caught in their own net.

Act IV. Carries On the Falling Action

Scene 1. The queen tells of the death of Polonius and at the same time shields Hamlet, claiming it to be an act of madness. Shrewdly enough, the king cries, "It had been so with us, had we been there!" for he begins to see that Hamlet's madness is directed against him, and is the more resolved to put him out of the way.

Scene 2 sees the almost maddened prince confronted by the two false friends, seeking to know what he has done with the body. Instead of telling them, he reproaches them for what they are—sponges to be used and sucked dry and cast off by the king. He goes with them to Claudius and in *Scene 3* is almost as brisk to Claudius, bidding him send to see if Polonius be in heaven, if not, "go seek him in the other place yourself." The king orders him to England and after his departure, tells of the plan to have Hamlet murdered there.

Scene 4 bringing in the heroic figure of young Fortinbras, risking his life for a trifle, gives Hamlet a chance to see his own procrastination against the soldiers' readiness to act, and makes him resolve to do the deed that he should have done months ago.

Scene 5 shows us poor Ophelia, quite mad under the double loss of father and lover, the one by the hand of the other. Laertes has returned from France, hot-foot, to avenge his father's murder and hurried burial. The Danes who follow him are acclaiming him king, and Claudius is in a fair way to lose what he had sinned to gain. But by strategy he turns Laertes' rage toward

Hamlet, aided by the sight of poor mad Ophelia, who increases her brother's fury against the prince.

Scene 6 gives us the news of Hamlet's escape from the ship and return to Denmark. The plot thickens and we feel the end approaching; and are not surprised in *Scene 7* to find Claudius openly planning with Laertes to work Hamlet's death by foul means. Laertes is strengthened in his purpose by the news of Ophelia's suicide, and goes to prepare the poison for his sword.

Act V. Brings the Catastrophe

Scene 1. Hamlet comes upon the grave-diggers, preparing Ophelia's grave. He muses at the equalizing power of death. When he realizes that the grave is Ophelia's and hears Laertes' grief, mad with his own pain he leaps into the grave and challenges Laertes to match his love for Ophelia. Laertes would have slain him had they not been parted, and they agreed to meet and fight.

In *Scene 2* Hamlet tells Horatio how he discovered the treachery of his friends, and how he met it with a scheme for their own death. He receives the messenger from Laertes and prepares to fight. Meeting Laertes he frankly admits his guilt, but pleads that he was mad when he did it. Laertes, knowing he fights with a poisoned weapon, forfeits all our sympathy by feigning to accept Hamlet's explanation. The king sets upon the table a cup of poisoned wine which is to secure Hamlet's death if the poisoned rapier fails. As the duel goes on, the queen, ignorant of the poison, drinks from the

fatal cup before the king can stop her. Laertes wounds Hamlet. In the fight they change weapons, and Laertes is wounded by his own sword. He confesses his treachery just as the queen, dying, warns Hamlet of the poisoned cup. Hamlet turns his sword upon the king and slays him with the poisoned blade. Dying, Hamlet begs Horatio to set his cause before the world, and urges him to aid young Fortinbras to the crown. "The rest is silence." The messengers bring word that the false friends are dead, and Fortinbras, hearing the tale from Horatio, bears the body away for royal burial.

STRUCTURE OF THE PLAY

A play is called a tragedy or a comedy according to the fate of the hero. If he overcomes the dangers and difficulties which beset him, no matter how real these may be the play is a comedy. If he is overcome by them and defeated, the play is a tragedy. In the tragedy the defeat of the hero usually ends in his death.

Each of the five acts of a five-act play has its distinct office in the plot. **Act I** gives the *setting*, sometimes called the *four W's*, time, place, circumstances, characters —answers to the questions where? when? why? who? regarding the story of the play. It strikes the keynote, sad or gay, tragic or comic, and gives the *incentive*, the moment at which the hero, or central figure, or force as he is sometimes called, does the act or makes the decision that starts the play going. **Act II** begins the *rising action*, the series of events arising out of the incentive and leads to the climax. It introduces all the characters necessary for the complication of the plot. **Act III** carries the rising action to the climax, though sometimes this is delayed till the fourth act. There may be one or two points in the action of intense interest, either before or after the climax, and distinguished from it only by the fact that the action does not turn there. These are called *tragic moments*. At the *climax* the action turns; whoever has been supreme in the ascending

action is here seen to begin to decline; in a comedy the counterplayer or counterforce, in a tragedy, the player or force. **Act IV** carries on the *descending action*, untangles the threads of the plot and clears the stage of all lesser figures to leave everything clear for the finale. **Act V** completes the action, showing the *catastrophe* or inevitable outcome of the action begun in the incentive carried to the climax and turned there. It may be preceded by a moment when for a moment it seems that the hero or force may yet succeed, but this is only for a moment; he is, in the tragedy, defeated and usually dies. The moment is known as the moment of *last suspense*. After the catastrophe there is usually a short scene or part of a scene in which the career of the hero or of his conqueror is summed up.

In *Hamlet* **Act I** informs us of the time, the reign of King Claudius of Denmark, the place, Denmark, the chief actors, Hamlet, his mother and his "uncle-father," and his father's ghost. It strikes the keynote in the opening scene with its talk of depression, of the threat of war, and of the ghost, and gives the incentive when Hamlet vows to avenge his father. **Act II** carries on the rising action; brings in the element of his love for Ophelia, and shows his plan of madness and the danger he is in from the spies, Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern. **Act III** shows the result of his having hesitated so long in the increased suspicions of Claudius and his own indecision. There is a *tragic moment* when at the play the king shows his guilt, but the *climax* comes when Hamlet lets go his chance to kill the praying king, fearing lest his soul go at once to heaven. **Act IV** unwinds the entanglements

and shows how he has brought new peril upon himself by his failure, and how the king plans to use Laertes to cause Hamlet's death. **Act V** has the stage clear for the last great scene in which Hamlet is wounded by the poisoned sword of Laertes, but not before he has wounded Laertes, seen his mother drink the poisoned cup, and killed the king. The *catastrophe* sees practically every one of the major characters dead upon the stage, and young Fortinbras and Horatio sum up the character of **Hamlet**. It may be outlined thus:

1. *Setting.* Time, reign of king Claudius.
2. *Place.* Denmark.
3. *Important Characters.* Hamlet, Claudius, Ghost, Ophelia, Queen, Laertes, Polonius, Horatio.
4. *Circumstances.* Murder of King Hamlet by his brother and the marriage of the latter to the queen but a month after the king's death. Unhappiness of Hamlet at his mother's act. The coming of the ghost.
5. *Incentive.* Hamlet's vow to avenge the murder revealed to him by the ghost.
6. *Rising Action.* Hamlet's plan to feign madness. Polonius' command to Ophelia to reject his addresses. His discovery of the spies and plan to foil them and keep his secret from the king. The news of the arrival of the players. His plan to make the king betray himself before the court by the agency of a play. The success of the plan. The king's betrayal.
7. *Climax.* His opportunity to kill the king and his failure to use it.

8. *Falling Action.* His rebuke to his mother.

Second appearance of the ghost. Death of Polonius. Madness and suicide of Ophelia. King's plot to get rid of Hamlet in England. His escape and return. King's plot with Laertes. The duel. The queen's death. Wounding of both Laertes and Hamlet by the poisoned blade. Murder of king. Death of Laertes.

9. *Catastrophe.* Death of Hamlet after he has, too late, kept his vow.

10. *Conclusion.* The eulogy by Fortinbras.

The Stories. There is but one story, that of Hamlet, with two threads, his revenge and his love. The disappointment in Ophelia, in finding that she is so ready to give him up at her father's demand, and her willingness to believe ill of him, deepen his melancholy and make him more prone to brood and less ready to act. Her death makes her brother, Laertes, vow the death of Hamlet, and so brings about the duel in which Hamlet meets his own death, after having at last kept his vow to kill the king.

Suspense. With but one plot it is difficult to secure suspense, but this is achieved by the alternation of scenes of action and those of meditation and hesitation on the part of Hamlet, by bringing in young Fortinbras, by the scenes in the home of Polonius, and by the scenes with the spies.

Comic Element. In such a play comedy would be utterly out of place. The nearest approach is the scene of the two gravediggers, with its grim irony.

Length. Because it is so profound a study of human nature the play is one of the longest. A modern producer finds himself confronted by the problem of what, in all its riches, to omit, and how to condense.

CHARACTERS

HAMLET

i. Like Julius Caesar *Hamlet* is a tragedy of the intellect rather than of the passions. Dowden says: "Neither Brutus nor Hamlet is the victim of an overmastering passion as are Othello, Coriolanus, Macbeth. The burden of a terrible responsibility is laid on each and neither is fitted for the burden. Brutus is disqualified for action by his moral idealism, his student-like habits, his tendency to deal with things in the abstract, rather than with men and acts. Hamlet is disqualified for action by his excess of reflective tendency, his moodiness, and his unstable will, which fluctuates between complete inactivity and fits of excited energy. Naturally sensitive, he receives a painful shock in the hasty second marriage of his mother; then follows the terrible discovery of his father's murder, with the injunction upon him to revenge the crime; upon this again follows the repulse from Ophelia. A deep melancholy settles upon his spirit and all life grows dark and sad to his vision. Although hating his father's murderer, he has little heart to push the revenge. He is aware that he is suspected and surrounded by spies, and partly to baffle them, partly to hide his real self, partly because his whole moral nature is indeed deeply disordered, he assumes madness. The dis-

covery of Claudius's guilt by means of the play leaves him still incapable of the last decisive act of vengeance."

Yet he is no coward. He faces Laertes boldly, and fights a clean fight, in sharp contrast to the deceit practised against him. Anxious to be set right before the world, he bids Horatio tell the world his story and absolve him. This said, "The rest is silence," for he has followed the traitor and the false wife to answer to the spirit of the king; his father, how he kept his vow. Men have believed that through him Shakespere spoke his own views. So they say of Jaques in *As You Like It*. Naturally, every profoundly meditative character will voice the philosophy of his creator, but aside from that there is no reason to believe that Shakespere made Hamlet his mouthpiece.

OPHELIA

Close to Hamlet in interest stands Ophelia, like him in that she is cast for a rôle too great for her to play, unlike him in any depth of intellect, a sweet little girl, obedient to the men of her family, gentle, lovable, kind, unwilling to hurt anyone, yet by her fatal weakness hurting to death the one she loved best. While Hamlet's madness is feigned to protect him, hers is real, the result of a strain too heavy for her gentle nature to bear. She is modest, quiet, lovable; yet not without a little of the shrewdness of her father when she turns Laertes' counsel back upon himself. Had she possessed a greater strength she might have given Hamlet the resolution he so sorely needed, but in all the play there is hardly a more

simply tragic scene than the one in which she tells her father how the prince came to her, so changed, and without a word, scanned her features closely, then sadly shaking his head, left her. He saw that no aid was to be found in her, that any battle must be fought against, rather than with, her help. Had she been stronger, the tragedy might have turned to comedy with a truly happy ending.

POLONIUS AND LAERTES

Polonius and Laertes are father and son, the one in his old age what the other in his youth promises to be. Shrewd, worldly-wise, cautious, selfish, neither one has a thought beyond his own interests and the name of his family, yet Laertes is ready to fight to the death for his father while Hamlet hesitates until he almost loses the chance of avenging the death of his father. Polonius is a silly old dotard who deserves the biting sarcasm of Hamlet, and earns his death by his spying. Hamlet knows him for the king's tool and feels but little compunction when he discovers his error in killing Polonius, thinking him to be Claudius.

HORATIO

Horatio is almost the only man in the play who wins our unqualified admiration, and yet he has but a minor part. Him alone Hamlet feels he can trust. It is to him that Hamlet tells the tale of his deeds as they should be told to posterity, forbidding Horatio to follow him in

death, and bidding him relate the true story to the world.

GERTRUDE AND CLAUDIUS

Gertrude and Claudius are fit partners in crime. There was a kinship of evil between them that naturally brought them together, yet neither one was entirely happy in wickedness, for Gertrude shows in her talk with Hamlet that she has not lost all sense of guilt, and the king, in his soliloquy after his vain effort to pray for pardon, shows us that his soul was not at peace in sin. Yet he does not hesitate to plan other murders to make his evil state secure, and in every case it is the same kind of deed that killed the former king, one that will leave him apparently clear, while removing an obstacle from his path. We feel that both get their just deserts, the queen by drinking the cup her guilty husband had fixed for her son, the king by the poison he had urged Laertes to put upon the rapier.

ROSENKRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN

As for the pair of spies, Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern, we feel nothing but contempt for men who use friendship as a cloak for spying, and who, for gold, would betray any friend who might trust them. They try to bargain with everyone, for gold is their only aim. For it they would connive at murder. And so we feel a sense of the eternal fitness of things when we learn how skilfully Hamlet has out-played them and sent them to the death they had planned to lead him to.

The Universal Quality of the Characters

It is a gloomy, brooding play, almost untouched by any ray of light. Every character is either weak, or commonplace self-seeking, or frankly selfish or evil, save Horatio, and he has too little to do to lighten in any way the gloom of the whole atmosphere. Yet in spite of this it has been the favorite of actors and audiences since the time of its writing. Indeed, it is said that every actor cherishes the desire to play Hamlet before he dies, just as every actress longs to play Lady Macbeth. Its greatness lies in the fact not that it is the mouthpiece of Shakespere or any other one person, but of all of us, our fears, our hesitations, our desire to be convinced before we are bold enough to act, our longing for the sympathy and understanding of others, our dread of the task too great for our strength, our fear of what lies beyond this mortal coil; all these, and many more ideas find expression for us in phrases that, by much repeating, have become so much a part of our language that we were not aware, till we read the pages of the play, that the words were these of any one man and not of humanity.

NOTES AND COMMENTS ON THE TEXT

Act I

Scene 1. The keynote of the play is here sounded, the bitter night and its depressing effect upon Francisco, who is "sick at heart," the talk of the ghost, the account of the uprising in Norway, the feeling that the dread apparition is an omen of evil to come to the state.

'Tis now struck twelve—the witching hour when spirits were permitted to leave their graves.

Thou art a scholar, speak to it, Horatio. The ghost must be addressed in Latin or some other learned speech, just why, nobody knew.

A little more than kin and less than kind. Too much related to him: he is uncle-stepfather and king in one, but I am not of his kind and therefore not really related.

Seems, madam? The emphasis is on the "I." She may seem to be what she is not, but he cannot.

Let the world take note—Claudius practically proclaims Hamlet his heir, perhaps with a view to making him a partisan. He compasses his own undoing when he urges Hamlet not to return to the university.

This too, too solid flesh—some take this with the queen's words, "He's fat and scant of breath" to mean that Hamlet is overburdened with flesh. Possibly that might account for his inertia.

His canon 'gainst self-slaughter—only the fear of offending God keeps him from suicide, so out of joint are the times in which he lives. Hot upon this scene of impotent grief comes the news of the ghost, and he resolves to see it.

The funeral baked meats—the feast served at the funeral had hardly time to grow cold before the wedding feast was set.

Foul deeds will rise—he suspects that Claudius has played foul, though so far he has nothing but surmise to go on. Note the two rhyming lines used to announce a decided change of scene.

Horatio fears that the ghost is an evil spirit come to do Hamlet harm. It may be a subconscious memory of this that later makes Hamlet doubt the ghost, himself.

The ghost has unmanned him and almost driven him mad. Perhaps it is at this moment that he conceives the idea of feigning madness to cloak his observations enters his mind. Note the flippant tone of his comments as the ghost from below urges them to swear, changing to a more serious and sane tone in his final comment, “Rest, rest, perturbed spirit.”

Act II

Scene 2. To be mad is to be mad—says Polonius. No wonder the queen exclaims, “More matter with less art. Talk sense, man!” But Polonius cannot help talking in antitheses and figures. “’Tis true ’tis pity; and pity ’tis ’tis true” “the cause of this effect—or rather of this defect,—for the effect defective comes by cause.” He cannot be simple to save his life.

An acry of children—Just at this time companies of school-boys, notably of St. Paul’s school, were acting in London, and the novelty had quite put the older players out of fashion. Consequently, many companies had gone on tour. This loss of a London audience, not any law against them, had sent them to other cities.

I am but mad north-north-west. I am only mad when I choose to be. He cannot resist the temptation to tease the spies whom he suspects of being what they are.

The entry of Polonius gives him a chance to vent his anger and disappointment in his former friends by being pointedly rude to Polonius, but in such a way as to pass for madness. Nor can he keep from making bad puns to the actors. The former taker of woman’s parts has grown a beard, and comes to “beard him in Denmark”—but he hopes that the latter’s voice has not yet changed, “cracked in the ring.” It was not till half

a century later that women took women's parts. As he talks to them, a plan comes to him to test the ghost. He sends off all but one in care of Polonius, and with this one plans to interpolate, into a play of their repertory a few lines that shall make it absolutely fit the account given by the ghost of the murder. Of course, Shakespere invented the play, for there could hardly be one so ready to their hand.

Act III

Scene 2. Speak the speech trippingly— Shakespere hated the affectation of many of the actors of his day—and later days—who strutted about the stage and mouthed the lines so that the sense was lost. He prefers that simple, natural manner which shall subordinate the actor to the part, and hold a mirror up to nature.

His praise of Horatio is perhaps the highest ever given to a friend. He finds Horatio a man who can endure all for a friend and find it joy, who is indifferent to the whims of fortune, who is not the slave of passion, but makes passion his servant. Therefore he trusts him.

Scene 3. Never alone did the king sigh—the doctrine of the divine right of kings had been firmly established in England with the coming of the Stuarts.

Scene 4. Note how, even while he hates his mother for her sin, he trusts her. He does not trouble to feign madness. The biting anger of his replies to her questions, and his accusations of her are not those of a madman. He hears the voice of Polonius and hoping it is the king, stabs through the curtain. It is part of his punishment for delay that he kills the wrong man. With but the one comment, "To be too busy is sometimes dangerous," he proceeds to hold up to the queen the mirror of reproach, to show her what she is, as partner in Claudius' guilt. He paints her sin in such words that she cowers before him. The queen must have been a woman of unusual charm that one man should commit murder for her and that the spirit of the murdered husband should refuse to let her be hurt.

Act IV

Scene 5. Ophelia, crazed by grief, is a pathetic figure. We blame her for her weakness, but pity her for the sorrow that has come to her as a part of the consequence of Hamlet's failure to take his opportunity to kill the king.

Scene 6. The scene with its account of the fight with the pirates proves that the failure of Hamlet is not due to cowardice.

Scene 7. In this scene both Claudius and Laertes, by their underhand trickery, lose any sympathy or respect we might have had for them.

Act V

Scene 1. Suicides might not have Christian burial, hence the grave-digger's wonder at Ophelia's receiving it. The talk of the two grave-diggers, with its little humor, is for the groundlings, to lighten the somberness of the approaching tragedy a little, and to create suspense. The puns of Hamlet, Horatio and the clown are typical of the time. All the plays are full of them.

Scene 2. His talk with Horatio is not the cunning of madness but the carefully reasoned plan of a shrewd contriver.

"Popped in between the election and my hopes—" For the first time we see a personal ground for his hatred of Claudius, other than that of the murder.

THE STYLE

In "Hamlet" we have Shakespere's noblest blank verse. The iambic pentameter of the normal blank verse is kept from monotony by the use of the pause for emphasis, the variation of the breathing pause or caesura, and the substitution of spondees and trochees for the iambic. The substitution which changes the expected place of the pause, as of trochee for iambus, gives special emphasis. Note the effect: "To be` | or nṓ | to be` |, that
is | the question.|" Here the trochee, "that is," puts the emphasis on "that" by its use in the iambic line. Note, too, the use of the extra syllable without the accent at the last, making the final foot an amphibrach and giving the feminine or double ending, with its curious hesitant effect at the end of the line.

"Hamlet" abounds in figures of speech. The metaphors are most striking. To Hamlet, Polonius, dead, is "at supper" inasmuch as the worms feast on him, a truly gruesome name for the death which, in another metaphor he calls sleep. Note the elaboration of the metaphor by which he calls Rosenkrantz a sponge in Act IV, Scene 2, and the consistency of the terms used; "the airy of little children" of Act II, Scene 2, as if the obnoxious boy-players were loudly screeching nestlings. Above all, note the immortal soliloquy, ("To be or not to be") known wherever the name of Shakespere is known, so rich in metaphor, "the sleep of death," the dead, as travelers to that bourne from which none return, the hardships of life becoming the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," the life after death—dreams which may be worse than the realities we know—why, if one starts to speak of figures, one must dissect the whole play.

Note, too, the bitter condemnation of himself, in Act IV, Scene 5, when he so justly sums up his own inaction as he

sees it beside the valor of the common soldier, who fights for a cause far less dear than his; his bitter comment on the vanity of human greatness in the gravedigger scene; the biting shrewdness of his comments to Polonius, who observes, "Tho this be madness, yet there's method in it."

The play is full of sayings that have passed into our language. "Frailty, thy name is woman." "A knavish speech sleeps in a foolish ear." "Your worm is your only emperor for diet."

"Imperial Caesar, dead and turned to clay,
May stop a crack to keep the wind away."

"Rightly to be great is not to stir without great argument, but greatly to find honor in a straw when honor's at the stake." "Rosemary for remembrance. Pansies for thoughts," "Hoist with his own petard"; and, perhaps best known, next to the soliloquy, the advice of Polonius as to the proper conduct of a gentleman.

Perhaps because of the lack of suitable costumes or scenery, the play is also full of vivid descriptions. One may see the former majesty of Denmark stalk by the warders that bitter night upon the ramparts, armed from top to toe, the beaver up, showing a countenance more in sorrow than in anger, the beard a sable, silvered. One sees the sunrise as,

"The morn in russet mantle clad,
Moves o'er the slope of yon high eastern hill."

One feels the nipping and eager air that bites shrewdly and makes the warder sick at heart.

And in Ophelia's description of Hamlet as "the glass of fashion and the mould of form," and in an earlier passage of the Hamlet of assumed madness, we need no picture to see with the poet's eye.

FAMOUS CRITICISM

No other play has called forth such volumes of criticism. Battles have been fought over single lines. Notice the *Variorum* edition and then consider how the play has moved the hearts of men. Perhaps the most famous criticism is that of Goethe in *Wilhelm Meister*: "To me it is clear that Shakespere meant in the present case to represent the effects of a great action laid on a soul unfit for the performance of it. There is an oak-tree planted in a costly jar that should have borne only pleasant flowers in its bosom; the roots expand, the jar is shivered. A lovely, pure and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve that forms a hero, sinks beneath a burden too heavy for it, which it cannot bear and must not cast away. All duties are holy for him; the present is too hard. Impossibilities have been required of him; not in themselves impossibilities, but such for him. He winds and turns and torments himself; he advances and recoils; is ever put in mind and ever puts himself in mind; at last does all but lose his purpose from his thoughts, yet without recovering his peace of mind.

Coleridge, in his "Notes and Lectures on Shakespere" says: "In *Hamlet* Shakespere seems to have wished to exemplify the moral necessity of a due balance between our attention to the object of our senses and our meditations on the workings of our minds—and equilibrium between the real and the imaginary worlds. In *Hamlet* this balance is disturbed; his thoughts and the images of his fancy are far more vivid than his actual perceptions; and his very perceptions, passing through the medium of his conceptions acquire a form and color not their own. Hence we see an enormous intellectual activity and a proportionate aversion to real action, and this character is placed in circumstances where it must act on the spur of the moment.

Hamlet is brave and careless of death, but vacillates from sensibility and hesitates from thought and loses the power of action in the energy of resolve."

Victor Hugo, in "*William Shakespere*," says: "Hamlet played the madman for his safety. From the moment he learns from the ghost of the guilt of Claudius, he is in danger. To know that the king was an assassin was treason."

Hudson, in "*Shakespere, his Life, Art, Characters*," says: "The ghost calls for revenge, but stipulates no particular kind. Hamlet naturally supposes the payment to be in kind, an eye for an eye. Is this right, from his point of view? It is nothing less than to kill by the same act his uncle, his mother's husband and his king. How shall he justify such an act to the world? How vindicate to himself the very act for which he is condemning another? Whenever he sees or even thinks of the king, his calmness forsakes him and a fury of madness takes possession of him. The best instance of this is the horrid scene where he raves out for sparing the king when he finds him praying; where it is plainly neither his moral reason nor his understanding, but simply his madness that speaks."

Taine says: "His madness is feigned, I admit, but his mind, as a door whose hinges are twisted, swings and bangs to every wind with a mad precipitance and with a discordant noise. He has no need to search for the strange ideas, apparent inconsistencies, incoherences and exaggerations, the deluge of sarcasm which he accumulates; he finds them within himself. He does himself no violence, he simply gives himself up to them."

SHAKESPERE'S LIFE

Born in 1564 in the little town of Stratford-on-Avon, tradition says on the twenty-third of April, he was christened in the parish church on the twenty-sixth. His parents were well-to-do, his mother, Mary Arden, being of a much better family than his father, a descendant of the noble family of Warwick. His father, John, was a burgher of Stratford, combining the trades of butcher, tanner, glover and leather merchant. From his mother he inherited his love for the beautiful and a finer taste than one would look for in the son of a man who could not write his own name. For some years the father was prosperous, and the boy attended the free grammar-school of Stratford, where tradition still shows his desk, and where he got the little Latin and less Greek of which Ben Jonson speaks. Every year at fair-time the mummers and strollers came to Stratford, so that the boy knew well just such players as those that came to Elsinore, to be used by Hamlet to trap the king. By the time he was fourteen family affairs had become so involved that his father was in prison for debt and the boy was making his own living in various ways, if we may believe the different traditions. Some say as teacher, some as butcher, some as apprentice to a dramatist, some as lawyer's clerk, believing that only so can his knowledge of legal terms be explained.

At any rate he was making his way enough to be married in November, 1582, to Anne Hathaway. There is a charming love poem ascribed to him, "She hath a way, Anne Hathaway." Some say the marriage was unhappy. In 1587 he went to London.

Here again we have nothing but tradition as to his beginnings. Some say he was horse boy outside a theater, then became odd-job man in the theater, then playwright and actor of small rôles,

at last friend and partner of Richard Burbage, and with him owner or lessee of the most important theaters of London, the Curtain, Globe, Blackfriars.

He made warm friends at the court of Elizabeth, the young Earl of Southampton being one of the first and dearest, to whom so many of the sonnets are addressed. Later he returned to Stratford, where he bought a house in New Place and in 1611 or 1612 moved there with his family. But at times the quiet of Stratford palled on him and he would ride half-way to London, to the Mermaid Tavern, to meet a gathering of London friends. At one of these merry meetings it is said he caught a fever which caused his death, on the 23d of April, 1616, the anniversary of his birth. An inscription composed by himself and graved on his tomb, has kept his bones safe:

Good friend, for Jesus' sake forbear
To dig the dust enclosed here.
Blest be the man that spares these stones
And cursed be he that moves my bones.

He was survived by his wife and two daughters, but the family was short-lived, for the last lineal descendant, his granddaughter, died in the reign of Charles II.

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EXAMINATION QUESTIONS

1. Give a vivid account of the scene in which Hamlet meets Laertes at the grave of Ophelia.
2. If Macbeth had been in Hamlet's place what would he have done? Justify your opinion in such a way as to show knowledge of both plays.
3. Contrast the character of Hamlet and that of Laertes.
4. Select from the play one incident that shows you Shakespeare's ideas of right and wrong—his standard of morals. Narrate the incident and explain what standard it shows.
5. Name two characters in the play that seem to you most like real people. With reference to each mention the characteristics that make the character real. In each case indicate by summary, supported if desired by quotation, some situation or speech that shows these characteristics.
6. Discuss at length the following quotation, illustrating it by reference to characters in the play:

Shakespeare creates human beings. No novelist, no other dramatist, has ever drawn so many imagined men and women that the world has accepted as real. We disagree about them. We question their motives just as we do those of people about us. But we never question their reality.
7. A critic has said of Shakespeare's women that they are always the redeeming, ennobling, uplifting influence in the play; that he has only three bad women in all the plays, and one weak woman, Ophelia, and it is because she fails him when he most needs her love and aid that Hamlet fails. What is your opinion as to this? Justify it from the play.
8. What event do you consider the actual beginning of the plot? Why? Point out moments of suspense in the play and show their significance in the development of the plot. Point out minor crises that might be called a climax, save that the plot does not turn, and show the significance of each in the plot.

9. Write a character sketch of Horatio, basing it upon what you see of him in the play.
10. Show the connection with the plot of two of the following characters: Laertes, Young Fortinbras, Polonius, Guildenstern, Francisco.
11. Show how the affairs of at least three of the characters of the play come to a justly deserved conclusion.
12. What character in the play seems to you most really noble? Write a vivid account of his finest act.
13. Mention two minor characters needed in the play and show how each one works into the plot.
14. Discuss, supporting your answer by references to the play, the question, Is the plot natural, i.e., true to life as you know it to be?
15. Give several reasons why the play should or should not be read in high school.
16. What do you consider the most exciting moment? Why? Reproduce it as vividly as possible.
17. Explaining especially the passages italicised, rewrite the following in your own words, making the meaning absolutely clear as you think it to be:

To be or not to be: that is the question.
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them! To die: to sleep;
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished. To die: to sleep;
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
Must give us pause; there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life;
For who would bear the *whips and scorns of time*,
The oppressors' wrong, the proud man's contumely,

The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
 The *insolence of office*, and the spurns
 That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
 When he himself might his quietus make
 With a bare bodkin? Who would *fardels bear*
 To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
 But that the dread of something after death,
 The undiscovered country from whose *bourne*
 No traveler returns, puzzles the will
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have
 Than fly to others that we know not of?
 Thus conscience does make cowards of us all
 And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought
 And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
 And lose the name of action.

18. In the passage point out a mixed metaphor, a good metaphor, a metonymy.

19. Explain the following:

- a. A custom more honored in the breach than in the observance.
- b. I lack advancement.
- c. Hoist with their own petard.
- d. I'll make a ghost of him that lets me.
- e. What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba?
- f. I am but mad north-north-west.
- g. There's a divinity that shapes our ends
 Rough-hew them how we may.

Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well.

20. Discuss the following:

- a. What do the chief characters in the play think about Hamlet's madness? To what causes do they attribute it?
- b. What is your opinion of his madness? Why?
- c. What does it enable him to do in the play?
- d. How long does he continue to appear mad?

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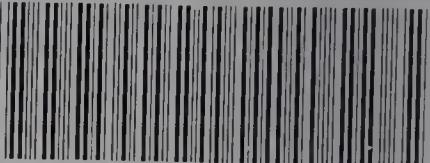
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